WOMEN LEADERS AND THE GOVERNANCE REVOLUTION IN VILLAGES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of women leaders in transforming village governance amidst the dominance of patriarchal culture. The primary objective is to uncover the experiences and leadership strategies employed by women in implementing significant changes within rural communities. Utilizing a qualitative method with descriptive analysis, data were collected through in-depth interviews with the village head, local officials, and residents of Metatu village. By adopting postcolonial feminist theory as an analytical framework, this research highlights the social, cultural, and structural challenges faced by women leaders. The findings reveal that they have implemented the digitalization of public services, enhanced community participation, and leveraged Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes) to increase local revenue (PAD). Despite employing transformational leadership strategies based on collaboration and effective communication, women leaders continue to face resistance and encounter a **double bind** in decision-making processes. These findings underscore the necessity of structural support and policy reforms to optimize the role of women in village governance.

Keywords: women leaders, postcolonial feminism, double bind, transformational leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The discourse on women in leadership has been an evolving topic in social, political, and gender studies. Across various parts of the world, women's participation in the public sphere has been steadily increasing, including in local governance. However, in societies where patriarchal culture remains deeply entrenched, such as Indonesia, women's leadership—particularly at the village level—continues to face significant structural and cultural challenges. (D. Emanratu, *Parlementer: Jurnal Kajian Politik dan Kebijakan* 5, no. 1 (2024): 45-60). This article focuses on women's leadership in village governance, particularly in the context of the selection of a female village head through an interim succession mechanism in Metatu Village, Gresik Regency.

Leadership at the village level plays a strategic role in determining the direction of development and the well-being of the local community. The village head is responsible for managing resources, establishing effective communication with residents, and

encouraging active citizen participation in various village development programs. (D. Harthanti, *Sosio Edukasi: Jurnal Studi Masyarakat dan Pendidikan* 1, no. 1 (2017): 9-20). In the context of women's leadership, this role becomes particularly compelling to examine, especially in societies that continue to uphold patriarchal norms, which tend to position women in a subordinate role compared to men in the public sphere (D. Harthanti,).

According to Kasran, a village official, *"Women's leadership in the village still faces various challenges, particularly in social and cultural aspects. However, an increasing number of community members are beginning to accept women in leadership roles."* (Kasran, wawancara, 8 Nopember 2023). Similarly, Diana Evita, a female village head, added, *"As a woman leader, I often face the perception that women lack the capacity to lead. However, through effective communication and transparency in policymaking, the community has gradually begun to accept my leadership."* (Diana Evita, wawancara, 6 Nopember 2023)

The strong presence of patriarchal culture in Indonesian rural communities often hinders women from participating in leadership roles. Traditional norms and values that prioritize men in leadership positions create significant challenges for women seeking to enter the realms of politics and governance. (K. H. Puspita, I. Fuad, J. N. Tambajong, dan Nuraeni, *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* 17, no. 2 (2024): 123-140). However, with the growing awareness of gender equality and the implementation of affirmative policies supporting women in leadership, an increasing number of women have successfully become village heads. Nevertheless, they continue to face social and political resistance.

In the context of Metatu Village, the selection of a female village head through an interim succession mechanism is particularly interesting to examine, as it reflects the dynamics of women's leadership within an environment still dominated by patriarchal values. One of the key challenges faced by this female village head is the prevailing perception that women, especially young women, lack the emotional and intellectual maturity required to make strategic decisions (D. T. P. Sari, F. S. Rosda, dan D. Susanto, *Imajeri: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia* 7, no. 1 (2024): 39-47). This stereotype is rooted in the assumption that effective leadership requires extensive experience and the ability to negotiate within village politics—an area that is often perceived as the domain of men (D. T. P. Sari, F. S. Rosda, dan D. Susanto, 2024, 39-47).

Additionally, village government officials often perceive female village heads as more difficult to control compared to their male counterparts. This perception is linked to the tendency of female leaders to strictly adhere to established regulations in the policymaking process. Resistance to women's leadership does not only come from village officials but also from the community, which remains accustomed to a masculine leadership model that prioritizes authority and control (Susanto, 2024, 39-47).

In village leadership, the communication style adopted by a village head significantly influences leadership effectiveness and community participation in

development. Previous studies have shown that women's leadership tends to be more participatory and based on a collaborative approach, whereas men's leadership is generally more hierarchical (M. Ilmia, *Jazirah: Jurnal Peradaban dan Kebudayaan* 4, no. 1 (2023): 44-52). This more inclusive communication approach can enhance community engagement in the decision-making process and strengthen the relationship between the village government and its residents.

In the context of Metatu Village, the communication style adopted by the female village head plays a crucial role in determining her leadership success. Effective communication can help mitigate resistance from the community and foster trust between the leader and village residents (M. Ilmia, 2023, 44-52). Through an open and inclusive communication approach, the female village head can strengthen citizen participation in various village development programs and create a more democratic social environment.

To gain a deeper understanding of women's leadership in Metatu Village, this article employs a postcolonial feminist approach as its analytical framework. Postcolonial feminism challenges the universalist perspective often adopted by Western feminism, which tends to overlook the cultural and historical differences experienced by women across different regions of the world (M. Ilmia, 2023, 44-52). This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding women's experiences within specific social and historical contexts, particularly in postcolonial societies such as Indonesia.

Postcolonial feminism also seeks to deconstruct colonial narratives that have shaped perceptions of women in formerly colonized countries. A key aspect of this approach is challenging stereotypes that depict indigenous women as passive or oppressed (M. Ilmia, 2023, 44-52). In the context of women's leadership in Metatu Village, this perspective helps to understand how female leaders negotiate with entrenched patriarchal norms and how they construct their agency in navigating structural and cultural challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach to understand the dynamics of women's leadership in the village. This approach aims to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by female village heads in carrying out their leadership roles. The qualitative method enables the researcher to examine various social and cultural factors that influence women's roles in local governance (W. Creswell, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018, 57).

The informants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which involves choosing individuals deemed most relevant to the research topic. The primary informants include the female village head, village officials, and community members who have direct experience with or perspectives on women's leadership in the village. This method allows the research to obtain rich and in-depth data on how female

leadership is received and perceived in a society that continues to uphold strong patriarchal values (M. Q. Patton, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2020. 77).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with selected informants. These interviews aimed to elaborate on individual experiences and perspectives regarding women's readiness for village leadership, as well as how the community responds to this change. Data analysis was carried out using the thematic analysis method to identify key patterns emerging from the interviews. These patterns were then contextualized within the framework of postcolonial feminism to better understand the structural challenges faced by women leaders in the village (V. Braun dan V. Clarke, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (2019): 589-597).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Studies on women's leadership have been conducted in various contexts. For instance, Musoli highlights the role of female leadership in improving employee performance (Musoli, *JPIM (Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Manajemen)* 6, no. 1 (2021): 64–88). Additionally, Musa et al. discuss the role of women in bureaucratic leadership (A. E. Musa, I. F. Latiep, and A. Herlina, Yogyakarta: PT. Nas Media Indonesia, 2023, 109). In Indonesia, data from the Central Bureau of Statistics indicate that the proportion of women holding managerial positions reached 32.26% in 2022 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2022). However, most existing studies primarily explore women's leadership styles and experiences in developed countries. There is still a limited number of studies focusing on the experiences of female leaders in postcolonial developing countries, particularly in navigating the structural and cultural barriers that hinder their leadership (E. A. Da Meisa and P. P. Anzari, *Jurnal Integrasi dan Harmoni Inovatif Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial* 1, no. 6 (2021): 711–719). Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by providing a space for the elaboration of women's leadership experiences in the village context.

This article highlights women's leadership in Metatu Village, Benjeng District, Gresik Regency, which is currently led by a young female village head, Diana Eviana (DE). She assumed office through the interim succession mechanism (Pergantian Antar Waktu – PAW), replacing Nurul Aski, S.Ag., on September 29, 2020 (*Diana Eviana Dilantik sebagai Kepala Desa PAW Metatu*). Under the PAW mechanism, a village head is selected through a village deliberation process and serves until the end of the term of the previous head who resigned or was dismissed. Notably, this consensus-based village head election was the first of its kind conducted in Gresik Regency.

During the village deliberation process, the interim village head (PAW) election was participated in by government officials, the Village Consultative Body (BPD), and community figures, including religious leaders, women leaders, and other influential figures. Each community leader was represented by seven individuals from each hamlet.

There were three candidates in the PAW election for the Metatu Village Head: Abdul Fatah, Muhammad Lutfi Hambali, and Diana Eviana. The voting results from the deliberation were as follows: Abdul Fatah received 11 votes, Muhammad Lutfi Hambali received 70 votes, and Diana Eviana won with 104 votes.

Diana Eviana had no prior political experience and held an undergraduate degree in Television and Film Studies from the University of Jember, followed by a postgraduate degree in Media and Communication from Airlangga University. Based on the researcher's findings, her educational background was one of the key factors that contributed to her acceptance by the community.

During her leadership, several notable policy changes were introduced by this female village head of Metatu, including:

1. Digitalization of Public Services

Due to her background in media, Diana implemented a public service policy through a website for processing ID cards (KTP), family cards (Kartu Keluarga), and other administrative documents. The digitalization of public services was a new initiative in Metatu Village. This transformation was expected to enhance the transparency of village governance, thereby improving the accountability of the village administration. Improving public services became one of Diana Eviana's key concerns as village head, particularly through the management of village media publications, including the use of social media, websites, and other digital platforms. Additionally, the application of digital tools allowed for monitoring the progress of village government performance, particularly in terms of revenue and expenditure, village fund programs, and other financial activities. According to Kasrin (interview), the transparency resulting from this initiative fostered trust within the community

2. Youth Engagement in Village Development

Another significant change experienced by the residents of Metatu Village was the involvement of youth in the development of village media and the enhancement of Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes) to increase the village's own-source revenue (PAD) and establish Metatu's signature products. The inclusion of youth in village governance not only enriched the development process with fresh and innovative ideas but also ensured the sustainability of leadership and a community more adaptive to social and economic changes.

3. Community Participation

In the governance practices of Metatu Village, efforts were made to involve the community at every stage of the policy-making process, such as aspiration forums, village deliberations, and the Village Development Planning Meetings (Musrenbangdes). Public spaces were actively integrated into these processes to ensure democratic governance functioned optimally.

The community was generally cooperative in attending aspiration forums, which served as the initial step before village deliberations. Some residents even conveyed their concerns directly to their neighborhood (RT) and hamlet (RW) representatives, especially in Metatu Hamlet, which lacked a village hall (*balai desa*) (Anna, interview).

Anna further stated: *"The community in Metatu Hamlet does not have a village hall, unlike those in Medangan and Purworejo Hamlets. However, they still actively participate. This reflects a strong sense of civic responsibility, even though it sometimes needs to be stimulated first."*

Despite the changes implemented by the female village leader, her leadership was often underestimated due to her young age and lack of political experience. Several community members interviewed in this study cited these factors as her main weaknesses. Additionally, her leadership style was perceived as more focused on formal engagements rather than informal interactions with the community, which limited her closeness to residents. Her communication style was also viewed as somewhat rigid and distant, making it challenging to establish deeper community connections. However, in multiple instances, she expressed a willingness to receive criticism and emphasized the need for mentors who could provide constructive feedback.

This underestimation is largely attributed to age and gender, as women are often perceived as lacking the experience and authority necessary for leadership. In societies where patriarchal values remain deeply ingrained, leadership is frequently associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and extensive experience in governance or organizational management. As a result, young women in leadership positions are often seen as insufficiently mature in decision-making, less capable of handling pressure, or overly emotional in their leadership style (*Lice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, Harvard Business School Press, 2007, 29*). Although the Metatu Village community has demonstrated some level of acceptance toward female leadership, a portion of the population still adheres to social norms that restrict women's roles in the public sphere. This contributes to the perception that women leaders—especially young ones—lack credibility compared to their male counterparts.

Some of the changes implemented by Diana Eviana (DE) in Metatu Village align with the premise put forth by Rudman and Phelan (*Herminia Ibarra, Robin J. Ely, and Deborah M. Kolb, Harvard Business Review, 2013, 24, 1*) that women with leadership ambitions often face backlash or negative reactions from their social environment. A village government official admitted feeling uncomfortable (pakewuh) about having a female leader, which sometimes created barriers in communication. This stems from the perception that women in leadership positions violate traditional gender norms, which expect them to be supportive rather than dominant. In many cases, resistance arises due to a lack of readiness to take orders from a female leader. As a result, young women in leadership roles must work even harder to prove their competence compared to their male counterparts.

In addition to social and cultural factors, structural barriers also contribute to the challenges faced by young women in leadership. Limited access to professional networks, mentors, and resources to support their leadership often hinders their ability to establish themselves as competent leaders (*Ibarra, 38*). This challenge is also experienced by Diana Eviana in Metatu Village. She acknowledges the need for feedback, criticism, advice, and mentorship to strengthen her leadership, though she has not yet fully obtained such support. Without adequate backing, young female leaders are more vulnerable to gender bias and discrimination in the decision-making process at the village level.

Women in leadership must struggle harder than men in societies that uphold patriarchal culture, as they face multiple social, cultural, and structural barriers that limit their access to power and recognition. Patriarchy positions men as natural and dominant leaders in the public sphere, while women are often associated with domestic roles, such as managing the household and supporting their families (*Sylvia Walby, Theorizing Patriarchy, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, 85-86*). This creates social expectations that leadership is not a suitable arena for women, forcing them to work harder to prove their competence and credibility.

One of the biggest challenges faced by female leaders in patriarchal societies is deeply ingrained gender bias. Women who display leadership traits such as assertiveness and courage are often perceived as deviating from feminine gender norms, which emphasize gentleness, compliance, and empathy. In practice, female leaders also experience the double bind (*Alice H. Eagly and Steven J. Karau, Psychological Review, Vol. 109, 573–598*), where they are expected to exhibit masculine characteristics to earn respect as leaders, yet are simultaneously criticized for not conforming to the stereotype of women as gentle and empathetic. Several informants in this study expressed these contradictory expectations of the female village leader in Metatu. This double standard makes them more vulnerable to criticism and makes it more difficult for them to gain support from colleagues and the community.

Women Leaders from a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, the leadership of women—especially in postcolonial societies like Indonesia—cannot be separated from the historical and cultural legacies of colonialism. Postcolonial feminism challenges the universalist narratives of Western feminism, which often overlook the specific struggles of women in former colonies (*Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity, 2003*). Instead, it emphasizes the intersections of gender, colonial history, and local socio-cultural structures that shape women's experiences in leadership.

In many postcolonial contexts, women's leadership is influenced by patriarchal traditions that were reinforced during colonial rule, where political and administrative power was monopolized by men. This legacy continues to shape village governance in

places like Metatu Village, where a female leader must negotiate with entrenched patriarchal values while asserting her authority in a traditionally male-dominated space.

Furthermore, postcolonial feminism recognizes that women leaders in rural areas face a double struggle—not only against gender-based discrimination but also against the structural limitations imposed by economic dependency, lack of access to education, and deeply ingrained cultural expectations (*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak?, 1988*). This is evident in theDiana Eviana, who, despite her progressive policies, still encounters resistance and skepticism due to age, gender, and the absence of a political background.

By applying a postcolonial feminist lens, this study highlights how women village leaders navigate patriarchal norms, assert their agency, and redefine leadership in local governance. It also underscores the need for institutional support, structural reforms, and cultural shifts to create an inclusive and equitable leadership landscape for women in postcolonial rural communities. Based on the practices observed in Metatu Village, it is evident that female leadership has initiated several transformative changes, particularly in the digitalization of public services and youth engagement in village governance. However, gender stereotypes often result in stricter scrutiny of the policies and decisions made by female leaders compared to their male counterparts, even when these policies aim to enhance community welfare. This is particularly evident in initiatives such as stunting prevention programs and the development of Village-Owned Enterprises (BUMDes) in Metatu.

The female village leader of Metatu has faced these challenges firsthand. Moreover, the community does not always readily accept innovative policies. For instance, despite efforts to introduce digital public services, many residents still prefer visiting the village office in person for administrative processes rather than utilizing the applications provided by the village government.

Her attempts to establish a more open and participatory communication model have also encountered resistance, particularly from individuals who are more comfortable with hierarchical and closed governance systems. As a result, she often has to work harder to prove her capabilities, facing sharper criticism and higher expectations compared to male leaders. Beyond governmental responsibilities, the social burden of being a woman, including domestic obligations, often adds to the pressure, requiring her to balance public and private roles in a more complex manner. Nevertheless, with inclusive leadership strategies and effective communication, many female leaders have successfully navigated these challenges and brought positive change to their communities.

From a postcolonial perspective, the activities of women leaders are rooted in efforts to deconstruct and challenge entrenched patriarchal structures, which have often been reinforced by colonial legacies. Female leaders seek to empower their communities by breaking away from traditional stereotypes, either consciously or unconsciously, thereby creating space for women's participation across various sectors of life.

This is evident in the initiatives undertaken by the female village leader of Metatu, such as conflict resolution efforts within the community and the establishment of a village-based "buy-and-sell" group to facilitate economic transactions among Metatu villagers. By enabling greater accessibility to local economic activities, these efforts not only enhance economic agency but also redefine leadership as a tool for broader social transformation rather than mere individual achievement.

Women village leaders are not merely passive subjects within a power structure dominated by patriarchy and colonial heritage; instead, they actively resist and drive social transformation through various strategies. One clear example of this is how they challenge colonial and global narratives that frequently portray women in postcolonial societies as powerless victims (*Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, University of Illinois Press, 1988, 271-313*). The female leader of Metatu Village employs digitalization of public services and youth engagement as strategic means to move away from conventional village governance practices. If women in developing countries have often been reduced to passive subjects in need of protection, postcolonial feminist activists have demonstrated that they, in fact, possess community-based resistance strategies that allow them to assert agency, redefine governance, and challenge long-standing socio-political norms.

The female leader of Metatu Village is fully aware that village governance must be directed toward a modern governance model, requiring various innovations, such as digitalization and open government. This strategic choice is carefully made with local conditions in Metatu Village in mind. In a more radical sense, there is an effort to decolonize public policy by implementing inclusive policies that consider local experiences and adapt to local realities. Women leaders in this context have constructed their own narratives, rather than merely operating within Western-imposed frameworks. This reflects the core argument of postcolonial feminist activists, who not only challenge male dominance in society but also reject the hegemony of global feminist discourse that often disregards local contexts. At the same time, they work to build more equitable transnational solidarity (*Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Feminist Review, No. 30, Autumn 1988, 61-88*).

Women leaders frequently encounter challenging situations stemming from gender discrimination, social bias, political pressure, and structural barriers within both bureaucracy and patriarchal culture, as previously discussed. This is evident in the experience of the female village leader in Metatu. When she attempts to enforce regulations in policy-making processes, she often faces resistance from village government officials, who perceive her decisions as too rigid.

The autonomy of women leaders in governance is not an insurmountable challenge, but it does require strategic navigation. To overcome these difficulties, women leaders develop various strategies that reflect their resilience, intelligence, and adaptive leadership. One of their primary strategies is building networks of solidarity and support,

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both among fellow women and within the broader community. In multiple interviews, Diana Eviana repeatedly emphasized this point. Women leaders tend to adopt a collaborative approach, fostering coalitions and leveraging empathy and effective communication to navigate obstacles and resistance (*Eagly and Carli*).

Moreover, women leaders who are firm and principled are often perceived as "too rigid" or inflexible in compromise. This perception directly contradicts gender expectations, which dictate that women should be more diplomatic and cooperative (*Laurie A. Rudman and Peter Glick, Journal of Social Issues, Vol. 57, Issue 4, 743–762*). In reality, assertiveness and consistency are essential qualities for effective governance. However, gender norms continue to pressure women to prioritize empathy and gentleness. When they deviate from this stereotype, they face harsher criticism than their male counterparts, even when exhibiting similar leadership traits.

Postcolonial feminism also interprets resistance to women's leadership as part of the colonial legacy that reinforced patriarchal structures. Women who attempt to take on leadership roles do not only face gender-based challenges, but also must navigate bureaucratic and political systems that remain predominantly masculine, restricting their mobility and influence. As a result, female leaders often have to work twice as hard to prove their competence compared to men in similar positions.

Thus, women leaders must rely on a transformational leadership approach. They do not merely focus on solving technical problems, but also strive to reshape the very structures that create barriers to their leadership. In patriarchal societies, women in leadership frequently encounter resistance in decision-making processes. To overcome this, they implement participatory strategies, engaging multiple stakeholders to ensure their decisions gain broader legitimacy and reduce conflict. Female leaders who adopt transformational leadership styles tend to be more successful in inspiring social change and fostering long-term commitment within their communities (*Peter G. Northouse, SAGE Publications, 2019, 88-91*).

In addition to building networks and adopting transformational leadership, women leaders often rely on personal resilience to withstand pressure. They develop emotional strength to navigate challenging environments, including dealing with criticism, negative stereotypes, and unfair expectations (*Serly Sandberg, 2013, 37-39*). In the context of Metatu Village, Diana recognizes the significance of community engagement in village governance and has embraced various groups to transform challenges into opportunities. She applies the same approach in leveraging media and social platforms to amplify women's voices and advocate for broader change.

With a combination of network-building strategies, transformational leadership, and emotional resilience, women leaders can navigate challenging situations and create meaningful change within their communities. They do not merely survive obstacles, but also inspire the next generation to advocate for equality and social justice.

CONCLUSION

Women leaders striving for change in Metatu Village, Benjeng District, Gresik Regency, experience a complex set of challenges, much like women in other postcolonial societies. Their experiences are unique and subjective, differing from those of women in other regions due to localized socio-cultural dynamics. Despite efforts to implement transformative policies, they continue to face resistance and obstacles across multiple aspects of governance. However, in line with the resilient character of postcolonial women, these challenges and barriers can be reframed as opportunities for social transformation. Women leaders demonstrate resilience in navigating patriarchal structures, positioning themselves as active agents of change at the village level, rather than merely passive objects of social transformation.

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